

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***Alien Shores: Tales of Refugees and Asylum Seekers from Australia and the Indian Subcontinent* edited by Sharon Rundle and Meenakshi Bharat (Brass Monkey Books, 2012)**

Starting with a telling introduction by the editors of the collection, *Alien Shores* is an impressive volume of creative work in the field of Refugee and Displacement Studies. The book is neatly divided into six parts, the titles of all these parts drawing their imagery from the ocean, the ocean which figures prominently in many of the tales told in the collection, and also acts as the divider and connector between international borders across the globe.

The first part is titled 'Ancient Tides'. The only story in this part, by Sophie Masson, is remarkable as a story of hope and life as it symbolically refers to the simultaneous loss of home as one knew it and the gaining of a new one as an outsider within the span of a single day.

The second part is aptly titled 'Tidal Force', as the three stories in this part deal with extreme emotions experienced by human beings across cultures and borders in sometimes dramatic, sometimes tragic turnarounds which result from the tensions arising from their socio-political milieu. That leads to the first story, by Deepa Agarwal, titled 'The Path', which is set in the backdrop of the Battle of Tarain that was fought between the Hindu and the Afghan armies, recreates the horror and confusion of the times as one of the characters broods over the repercussions of his decision to run away from the battle and save his life. 'Morichjhāpi' by Amitav Ghosh depicts the trials and tribulations of the Bangladeshi refugees who had settled in an island called Morichjhāpi in the Sundarbans of West Bengal, India. Exploited in their native land by the powerful and ill-treated in India, these nowhere people appear in Ghosh's story as a mass of vulnerability. The last story in this segment 'Sins of the Mother' by Jamil Ahmed, is a poignant story of tender love, faith, and the attempt to carry on with life in spite of long-drawn conflicts. The issues of porous borders in the Pakistan-Afghanistan territories and the severe impact of governmental decisions on the marginal of the land are very delicately put in this piece.

The third segment is titled 'Turbulent Crossings'. 'Dera Baba Nanak', the first story of this segment is originally written by Joginder Paul and translated in this edition by Naghma Jafir. Drawing from the ghastly memories of Indo-Pak partition, especially in the depiction of the character of a mad man who is searching for his lost penis so as to ascertain his own identity as either a Hindu or a Muslim, the author refers not only to the mindless massacres that took place during the partition but also to the futility of such actions. 'Remembering Timor-Leste', by Susanne Gervay, is a sensitive story written from the perspective of a child who remembers her sister being dragged away by enemy soldiers from her home in Timor-Leste. In 'A Wall of Water,' Michelle Cahill gives us an account of the loss of home and the acceptance of a new reality and a different way of life for the refugee. Sarita, the central character in the story, witnesses the negativity amongst the locals in Australia about refugees and the governmental and bureaucratic bias against people genuinely in need of asylum and shelter. 'The Dust of Life,' the final story of the segment, by Arnold Zable, is not only a story about refugee and asylum seeking, but also about the large-scale physical, psychological, and cultural violence of the long-drawn Vietnam War.

The next section, titled 'Adrift' begins with Anu Kumar's lucid story 'Big Fish'. This is the story of a fisherman family in Tamil Nadu, India who catch a stranger from the sea in

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their net and how the family, especially the young girl Munni, regard him and treat him as one of their own, till the Indian government intervenes to arrest him. This is a poignant story as the stranger offers definite hints of being an innocent family man lost in the sea. 'Life Hanging in the Balance' by Abdul Karim Hekmat is the next story, in which Musa, the central character in the story, has witnessed bloodied violence by the Taliban as a Hazara from Afghanistan; seeking asylum in Australia and being denied that by the Refugee Review Tribunal leaves him with no hope for either a present or a future. The next story in the segment, 'Ariel's Song', is about Ariel, a four-year-old girl who was used to a comfortable life in Australia before her parents become homeless by a twist of fortune. The living conditions for the homeless are so filthy that it she becomes seriously ill.

The next segment titled 'Counter Currents' begins with a story by Meenakshi Bharat titled 'The Lost Kingdom'. Written in the backdrop of the Indo-Pak partition, this is the story of a young girl's curious search for a playmate in the backyard of her grandparent's dwelling, and the revelation that it brings. 'Without Address, Without Name' by Sujata Sankranti, the next story of the section, is set in Bengal, India and focuses on the struggle of a young mother to survive in an alien land with dignity for her child and herself. 'The Ogre', by Ali Alizadeh, is a story about drawing a line between sympathy and cautiousness with regard to the issue of asylum seekers. The story is about the narrator's empathy for a fellow Iranian who was in a detention centre in Australia for a long time and the consequences of it. Its somewhat abrupt ending provides an anxious quality to the story.

The last part of the book, 'Riding the Tide', features five stories all of which weave across the common theme of coming to terms to with their own uprooting and eventually celebrating survival and success in the land that adopted them. Bijoya Sawain's 'The Limp' is the story of Nipen and his family who have migrated from East Bengal to Shilong, Meghalaya, India; the story takes the reader through one local Khasi woman's genuine affection that helps Nipen's family stand on their own in the new land. Tabish Khair's almost autobiographical 'A State of Niceness' is about an Indian citizen's reconfiguration of his own self as he settles down in a West European country and his growing affinity towards his adopted geographical space. 'My Sister's Sister' by Julia Mackay-Koelen is the story of Lil and Linh as they discover the pain and pleasure of their unusual connections to a refugee family. The last story of the collection, by Linda Jaivin, is simply named 'Karim'. A story of hope and regeneration, this fine narrative is about a young refugee's struggle for survival in an alien land and the celebration of his success at it.

Overall, an absorbing read, *Alien Shores* lives up to its title as it takes the reader along the turbulent rides commonplace for people in exile and migration and sensitises the reader to the issues concerning the refugees across the world.

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